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ABSTRACT

Nonsense poetry can make a valuable contribution in reinforcing children's reading skills and developing their literary appreciation. This paper describes several nonsense poems and books for children, points out their appeal, and stresses the value of reading such works to children. It also offers a few suggestions on techniques to use in reading nonsense poetry aloud to children and in using some of the recommended works to promote the development of specific reading skills. (GW)

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Reading Nonsense (Poetry) Makes Sense in the Reading Program

In reading poetry to children, teachers have probably discovered at one time or another the joyous delight of the children's reactions to a rendering of a nonsense poem. Nonsense poetry is just as funny and well-written today as some of the past poetic experts of nonsense verse have provided. Teachers should not overlook the valuable contributions that nonsense poetry can aid in reinforcing basic reading skills and developing literary appreciation of poetry with children.

Since the 19th Century when Lear's special verse of unusual animals and strange occurances became known to English-speaking children have poets and educators realized the many benefits of providing lyrics of nonsense to children. Poems offered by Ogden Nash and Dr. Suess since the 1930's have found their special niche in classroom texts and trade picture books for adults and children alike. Contemporary poets such as Kroll, Ets, Ciordi and McCord pen humorous lines that often defy logic, but provide a release from the tedium of realistic poetry.

In a recent article, Jay William Smith the critic and poet described realistic poetry as offering little dimension to the imagination and no rhythmic assurance or consolation (1976). The nonsense poetry titles mentioned in this article fulfill the objective of presenting lively verse fulblown to incougrous proportions that tease the logical processes of the mind and expand the boundaries of enriched vocabulary and language manipulation. Teachers may find numerous single volumes that contain

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several short jingles or a longer story line narrative to suit the occasion.

A story poem, The Quangle Wangle's Hat (Lear, 1970) is a large beaver hat profusely decorated with such colorful finery that it can be seen from miles away. It soon attracts all kinds of strange creatures wanting to make a home in it. Helen Oxenbury's bold and vibrant illustrations provide the reader with large graphic interpretations of the Fimble Fowl with a corkscrew leg, the toe-less Pobble, the musical Blue-Baboon, and the Dong with luminous note. Those and other wild creatures find and make a happy home in the Crumpetty Tree.

If the reading teacher feels that a "basic" justification is needed in sharing these original and creative poetic fantasies with children, then it could easily be so accomplished. There are many of the concisely stated verses that lend themselves well to a formal reading skills study of dipthongs and diagraphs, initial consonant sounds, various vowels sounds that deviate from common spelling patterns and the different word-endings.

A study of such various skills are all encompassed in such a marvelous fable by Arnold Spilka from his A Rumbudgin of Nonsense.

Little Mable
Liked to babble,
Liked to quibble,
Liked to gobble,
Bought a coat
Made out of Sable
With a very
fancy lable;
Wed a man
Whose name was Abel,
Bought a house

That had a wobble.
When they talked
The house would bobble,
When they junped
Down came the gable,
And it gave them
Lots of trouble.
One sad day
They had a squabble
And the house
Fell into rubble.
That's the end
Of this old Fable. (1970, unpaged).

Restraint on the teacher's part should be the rule, however in using poetry to "teach" reading skills. Rather, an informal and relaxed manner would best be observed in reading poetry aloud to children on a daily basis. The regular and consistant sharing of nonsense poetry on occasion can provide a touch of whimsy and music. Th most profound quality of poetry is music which attracts and holds the interests of children. The various reading skills can be casually noticed and referred to in follow-up activities. The quality of music and rhythm is still as fresh today as it was twenty-five years ago in Marie Hall Ets' Beasts and Nonsense (re-issued in 1968). Such a poem as "The Cheetah" reflects the general essence of music, "When You meet a Cheetah in the zoo/It's okay to stop and say, "How do you do?" / But when you meet a Cheetah on the street-a/ I wouldn't stop to speak-a, if I were you." (p.22-23). The simple pencil drawings effectively capture the funny procession of animals that children have found appealing for a quarter of a century.

Writing nonsense verse that stands the test of time must certainly be a difficult task. And only the most talented poets should try writing

it. As Smith has pointed out, the basic requirement for writing poetry for children is consumate skill; only the most accomplished poetic technician should be allowed to write for children. (1976, p. 23).

One of the newer poets on the publishing scence of nonsense poetry is Steven Kroll. This "poetic technician" will surely be remembered because his poetic offerings of incredible happenings are merely exaggerated expressions of every day events that ordinary folk (mainly children) find themselves experiencing. In Sleepy Ida and Other Nonsense Poems, thirty poems, some short and some long, acquaint the reader with such people as "Magical Pierce" and his treasure-laden pockets; What happened when Jody took the subway Home"; Peter's second thought on "Running Away"; the end of Jamey's Tennis Sneakers"; the story of Sleepy Ida who changed her ways and other characters who have cats,hats, and a shipfilled backyard. (Kroll, 1977). Seymour Chwast has appropriately matched the humorous tone of this poetry volumne with his exaggerated and colorful pen-line drawings.

In Kroll's latest offering, Gobbledy-Gook (1977) we read of Edward and what he does to get ready for school in the morning. All children will easily identify with Edward as he goes through the morning ritual of bathing, brushing his teeth, making his bed, getting dressed, eating breakfast and the general confusion of a household trying to meet the scheduled school bus's arrival. Nothing at all is unusual about the story line. The language however, is a hilarious use of similar-sounding words that are used in place of the regular words. The topsy-turvy language is pure gobbledy-gook and makes for fun reading, such as:

* he squashed his lace

* he flushes his teeth
* he swallows his legs
* he hisses his brother and blisters

Fortunately, the illustrator, Kelly Oechsli has drawn some literal interpretations in a cartoon style that greatly aids the reader's comprehension of the mis-used words. Unlocking the puzzling language would present a strong challenge to children interested in solving a language mystery. Teachers may heed the sagacious advice of Kenneth Goodman's theory of miscue analysis with this book. And all children will enjoy the double implications of meanings when thrown out of context in this outrageously funny story.

That nonsense can make sense in a reading program is not a mere nonsequiter. If a teacher fully values the concisely stated form of poetic verse and is willing to share the humor-filled volumes cited in this article, children will surely gain a more fully developed understanding that reading does make sense.

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